

The Terrorist Shock as Challenge¹

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Waves of terrorism come and go, but the ingredients remain the same. We always recognize the repellent phenomenon, but we fail to come close to its definition. A “successful” act of terrorism--and certainly the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) was successful in terms of the shock it provoked and the profundity of its effects--features a special element recurring, with ever increasing intensity, in all acts of terrorism. This is its *unconventional* nature, its unexpected nature, and the fact that it violates all the rules of fair play. In this context, “fair play” denotes some elementary, primitive rules of the game. Modern terrorism does not play by legal norms, even if these norms pretend to govern deadly conflicts, such as the laws of warfare--whether international or internal--not even by the rules of *omertà*, or any of the other restraints supposedly present in the dealings among criminals.

Effective terrorism has to break all the rules, all the time, insofar as it has to be unexpected and unpredictable. Thus, the great terrorist shocks of the nineteenth century appear tame in comparison with the assassinations and destruction in the twentieth century. This is why the WTC disaster, marking the beginning on the twenty-first century, overshadows all the previous ones. Not only were thousands of human beings killed but hundreds were used as instruments to kill the others, like some kind of gruesome ammunition or weight in the missiles. The world has become accustomed to suicide attacks, where individual attackers sacrifice their lives to harm their perceived enemies and to inspire awe. But how does one describe the hapless passengers of the airplanes hitting the buildings in New York and Washington?

Attempting to define terrorism, and putting aside the most idiosyncratic views of it, most observers seem to agree on the following features. A terrorist attack is essentially *political*: its message is political, and its expected results are political. At the least, the intention of the perpetrator is political. Granted, determining whether the intent was truly political could meet with difficulties in courts of law, but the term is clear enough in its ordinary sense.

Another aspect of the terrorist act is the nature of its target, in fact, its *dual target*. Unlike the simpler political assassination, say, where the victim merely has to be removed with political change effected thereby, in a typical act of terrorism the immediate object of the attack is more or less irrelevant. The true target is wider; it is all those who identify with the immediate target and are expected to change their political behavior. The agent linking the immediate and the wider target is *fear*. (“Terror,” in its original sense, derived from the Sanskrit *tras*, “to shake.” It is interesting that in some Slavic languages this root reappears in words having a similar meaning, connecting bodily trembling with fear.) For that reason, the primary target is, as a rule, highly *symbolic*. Damaging a symbol implies a threat to everything it represents and to everyone identifying with that symbol.

Uniformed people have always been most susceptible to terrorist attacks because they so clearly symbolize the state, the government, the organization for which they work. The victim in uniform can remain nameless and faceless, and this is how such persons are recorded in the media: “. . . A soldier, twelve policemen, the crew of a helicopter,” and so on. Inanimate objects, too, such as monuments and important buildings, have become targets of politically motivated terrorists. The attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and on the Pentagon are good examples. To be sure, there were massive casualties, but for the terrorists they were collateral damage in the most literal sense. The attackers were not interested in the people found in the buildings; they wanted to hit convincingly the center of world capitalism, globalization, US supremacy, American militarism, and whatnot. For the viewers of television reports it was conspicuous that the people evacuated from the ruins of the World Trade Center and their worried relatives were not typical Americans, as depicted by those fond of generalizing the image of arrogant possessors of global power, and they were certainly not WASPs; they looked, as often as not, black or Hispanic.

We come now to a feature in the definition of terrorism that has presented the greatest difficulties. Namely, an act of terrorism is repulsive because it is somehow morally wrong. In other words, it affects innocent people, regardless of whether they are deliberately targeted or are accepted as collateral victims. This means that they are not *guilty*, not just in legal terms but in the wider sense of not being responsible personally for the purported evil identified and assaulted by the terrorists. Unfortunately, people can be perceived as guilty in many unexpected ways. Hanns Martin Schleyer, kidnapped and killed by the German Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion) in 1977, was guilty because he was the chairman of the employers' association, that is, "the most important German capitalist." A group of tourists flying back from their vacations in Majorca were hijacked and brought to a desert air strip in Jordan. They were considered guilty by their abductors--frivolously enjoying life while the people of Palestine were suffering under the Israeli yoke or having a good time at the expense of the poorly paid migrant workers of developing countries. A Russian anarchist said that he would not hit an innocent if he killed the first bourgeois he would encounter.

The ambiguity regarding the innocence of the victims explains the need to differentiate between so-called good and bad terrorists. In fact, this explains the tendency not to apply the term "terrorist" to "good" terrorists at all. The latter become "guerrillas," "freedom fighters," "rebels," "members of resistance movements," and so on. When the Serbian government recently changed the rhetoric of the previous regime and stopped calling the insurgent ethnic Albanians terrorists and labeled them "extremists" instead, this change of rhetoric was welcomed internationally as a remarkable sign of moderation.

The reactions abroad to the outrage of September 11 have been influenced by this ambiguity. In the eyes of fundamentalist Muslims, all Americans are liable for the various misdeeds of their government and its allies. If we look to the poorer part of the European continent, to countries formerly under communist rule, the reaction appears to depend on the degree to which people believe the United States played a beneficial role in their liberation from Soviet dominance. However, if the United States is remembered as an enemy, or as a powerful opponent, the feelings tend to be mixed. This accounts for some reactions in Yugoslavia and Macedonia. Visually, the collapse of prominent buildings in the United States looked to the inhabitants of Belgrade very similar to documentary footage of the NATO bombing of the targets in that city in 1999. If not general approval of these acts of violence toward the United States, there certainly was a subdued feeling of *Schadenfreude*, a perception of deserved and just revenge on Americans. After years of intense anti-Islamic propaganda, an ordinary Serb, confused by four lost wars, has become schizophrenic: he disliked Americans and thought that they had it coming, but at the same time he could not be brought to side with the Muslim terrorists because he had been told so many times that they were his archenemies.

As for the terrorists, one can only guess what they expect to be the effects of their actions. Terrorists are mostly irrational. However, it is quite certain that many of them count on an overreaction by the system attacked. Often enough, they have stated that their purpose is to unmask the culpable state, to force it to show its true face. The main difference between the majority of the terrorist acts in the past and the events of September 11 is that the former had been spatially limited to a state, or to a group of states, and that this most recent action treated the world as the single arena of its actions. In a way, it proved most, in an unexpected manner, of the points of the advocates of globalization. Osama bin Laden's collaborators and followers (if we assume he masterminded the attack) claim to embody, in fact, a "movement of rage" purporting to represent everyone frustrated by the inevitability of the world becoming one and of its following the commercial and cultural patterns imposed by or at least symbolized by the United States.

On the other hand, the US public and its opinion makers have perceived the attack as an assault on their homeland and its values. The reaction has become easily identifiable as a good, old patriotic rallying around the flag. The government was forced to act, to do something decisive, something strong. However, the United States is only a superpower vis-à-vis other states: in relation to nonstate actors, including private terrorist organizations of unknown size, a superpower is only as strong as any other state. The huge American military machine possesses not only the necessary military hardware but also adequate experience, skills, and training to prevail in a classical war situation. Pressed to act, and unable to adapt quickly to fighting an elusive transnational enemy, US decision makers chose to identify Afghanistan and its Taliban government as the real adversary. This paradoxical situation can be best comprehended if one tries to imagine the reaction of serious commentators to any prediction a scholar might have made--let us say, only two or three years ago--that the United States would be soon at war with Afghanistan.

Previous waves of terrorism were also unpredicted, unpredictable, and puzzling for governments and their law-enforcement agencies. However, ingenious solutions were ultimately found in Italy, Germany, and other countries. It may be hoped that an antidote will be invented for this particular situation, though it is certainly not the seeming overreaction and disproportionality of the attacks against Afghanistan.

If there is something that can be said about terrorism, with a relative degree of certainty, it is that acts of terrorism *do not prove anything*. Such acts do not indicate that the perpetrators are strong in numbers. A terrorist act, regardless of the shock it produces, does not show that its authors have many followers: it may just as easily demonstrate that there are too few adherents to support the cause by democratic, majoritarian means. Neither does a terrorist outrage testify that the cause of the terrorists is just, nor that they are right in the legal or moral sense. Acts of terrorism cannot generally be considered symptomatic of some intolerable state of affairs. There have been serious and deadly terrorist waves in the richest, as well as in the poorest, countries; in the most democratic states, as well as in those governed by tyrants. One can always recall the singular absence of terrorism in some of the worst totalitarian systems known to history, such as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union (in spite of so many so-called terrorists tried and executed there).

Saying that the United States has somehow invited this terrorist attack by its previous political conduct, that it is being punished for supporting bad causes and allies, and for its indifference toward the fate of the downtrodden masses, oppressed peoples and so on, means accepting some of the above unwarranted conclusions. This is perhaps what the terrorists believe, but it is not necessarily the full explanation of their behavior. Rationalizing the actions of terrorists has always been an idle pursuit.

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